

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“MAKING IT SIMPLE”
JANUARY 23, 2011
Matthew 4:12-23
All SERVICES**

The simplicity of Jesus' call to his disciples is surprising. *“Come and follow me,”* he said. This remains the heart of the Christian faith, that we hear Christ's call and decide to follow him. Discipleship may demand much of us before we are done, but it begins with responding to a simple call. We have heard that call here at Park Hill and we are living into a whole new dimension of spirituality.

Our scripture lessons emphasize the oneness of our faith, despite the diversity of our creedal expressions and liturgical forms. Park Hill is a church where we pray for tolerance and cooperation in all groups where the basic simplicity of faith is obscured by minor differences of interpretation.

There were theological differences between Paul and the other apostles. However, he did not make these a test of faith, or of fellowship. All that really mattered was that Christ be lifted up as the world's Savior and Lord. For almost 100 years we have done that.

A new theological system or scientific theory is often evaluated by the test of simplicity. Complicated systems of knowledge ultimately rest on a few simple and vital truths. If an elaborate system of thought cannot be adequately expressed in a simple statement or formula, its validity is questioned. Faith is both simple and profound.

In our frantic, fast-paced world it is highly likely that one of the top five New Year's resolutions had to do with simplifying one's life. It is a common theme running through our conversations. It seems that everyone feels overextended, pulled in too many different directions, or simply exhausted, all due to the increasing complexity of life. What is the best way to actually simplify one's life?

Sometimes it is a physician or a counselor who suggests that it would be wise to simplify our lives. When we begin to think about it, the tendency is to try to decide what to give up, what we can remove from our overly active lives: **“I know, I’ll start going to work an hour later,”** or, **“I’ll leave work an hour earlier.”** Simplifying one’s life, however, is not merely a matter of schedule changes, nor is it about doing less and less until we are doing nothing. Simplicity is not inactivity, any more than retirement is. Simplicity is about living for what really matters. And we are simply going to be obedient to God’s Word here at Park Hill.

The truly frantic life is the one where no priorities have been set, where we rush to meet every demand with the same energy. To use a homespun analogy, we become like a stray dog at a whistler’s convention. What the dog needs is a master, who has a recognizable whistle. It simplifies things. Henry David Thoreau wrote of his passionate desire to find the essence of life’s meaning, then said, **“Our life is frittered away by detail. . . Simplify, simplify.”**

Marriage today is not faring too well. It is certainly not the easiest of relationships and the culture is not exactly marriage-friendly. Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, said the modern concept of marriage is unique in human history. Never before has a relationship been burdened with so many varied expectations. A single relationship is expected to fulfill our sexual needs, our companionship needs, our needs for emotional intimacy, our parenting and family needs, and our economic partnership needs, to name only a few! However, the marriage vow, if taken seriously, significantly simplifies one’s life. Saying, **“I take you and no other,”** settles all manner of things, and is the right ideal even when we fail at it.

One way of understanding the Incarnation is to see it as an instance of cosmic simplification. In a single human being is revealed both the Creator of the universe and the highest possibilities of the creature made in God’s image. In other words, when God chose to be revealed, to become known, it was in a simplifying act. It was as if God said, **“Here, I will become one of you so you can know and understand me.”** That’s cosmic simplification!

The example of the Incarnation shows that simplification does not necessarily diminish value or worth, but makes it more accessible. Too many preachers sell the gospel short through glib over-simplifications. They may draw a crowd, but they diminish Christ. Hear a wise admonition: **“Do not trust the simplicity on this side of complexity, but only trust the simplicity on the other side of complexity.”** In the fourth century, St. Jerome said, **“I have revered always not crude verbosity but holy simplicity.”** These words should be engraved on the

preacher's side of every pulpit in the world. What the church needs is not verbosity, contrived enthusiasm, or pious affectation, but the guileless simplicity of Jesus.

Holy simplicity cannot be achieved unless it comes from the heart. **“Purity of heart,”** said Kierkegaard **“is to will one thing.”** Purity of heart, he is saying, is singleness of mind. It doesn't mean having a one-track mind, but having a spiritual center. We cannot have more than one center, but some of us never give up trying.

In a world where Christianity has been institutionalized for many centuries, where ecclesiastical expressions of our faith exist around the world, it is not entirely surprising that we underestimate the value of our simple origins. Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew 4 records two vital aspects of these beginnings. First, there was the simplicity of Jesus' preaching. There was no concern on his part about exegesis, exposition, or illustrations. He had no training in rhetoric or communication theory. He came preaching, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”** In this he showed very little originality. John the Baptist had been preaching essentially the same thing. But what more was necessary?

Second, there was the simplicity of Jesus' invitation. His recruitment of disciples was so incredibly simple that it gives us pause. He did not inquire of Simon, Andrew, James and John where they had received their theological education, or what prior experience they had in ministry. He did not ask for references or a resume. As far as we know he conducted no background checks! He found them fishing and said simply, **“Follow me, and I will make real fishermen out of you!”**

If we doubt that Jesus was seriously concerned with simplifying life, remember some of his favorite illustrations. Apparently we moderns didn't invent stress and worry. Jesus encouraged his hearers to quit worrying about the future. **“Take no thought of tomorrow,”** he said, which implies **“give yourselves to living fully today.”** He encouraged them to learn from the lilies of the field and the birds of the air as examples of peaceful, trusting existence. Remember, too, his use of children as models of trust, love, and joy. They also represented holy simplicity. **“Except you become as a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

Something in us both cries for simplicity and spurns it. For example, so much of our Christian discipleship would be realized if we simply followed the Golden Rule. But we complicate differences between nations and races, religions and

classes, sexes and generations. Many of these complications would dissolve if we simply treated others as we want to be treated.

Faith functions like a beacon guiding us through the darkness. No matter how rough the road or dense the gloom, we can make it through if we follow the light. The simplicity of faith is that we are asked simply to faithfully follow the light we are given.

That is what makes Park Hill such a special and unique place. We have actually attempted to take our commitment for our Christian discipleship seriously. There is no attempt here to complicate anything. We say whosoever will let him/her come.

If you too have a desire to give yourselves to living fully today, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.